

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Sh'mot – Stop negative speech

This week's Parasha of Sh'mot contains the famous story of Moshe at the burning bush. Hashem asks Moshe to go to Mitzrayim to become the leader of Bnei Yisrael and to ask Pharaoh to let Bnei Yisrael go free. Moshe is very reluctant to accept. He does not think that he is the best person for the job and he doubts that Bnei Yisrael will believe him. It takes Hashem quite some time to convince Moshe. At one point, Hashem gives Moshe some signs that he can use to convince Bnei Yisrael that he is legitimate. The first sign is that Moshe's staff turns into a snake. The second sign is that Moshe's hand becomes temporarily afflicted with the skin affliction known as tzoraat.

Why did Hashem choose these two signs? Rashi explains (Breishit 4:3,6) that these two signs contain an implied rebuke of Moshe. Both of the signs hint at lashon hara (negative speech). The snake reminds us of the snake in Gan Eden which used negative speech to convince Chava to eat the forbidden fruit. Tzoraat is the punishment that is given to someone who is guilty of lashon hara.

This rebuke was appropriate because Moshe said that the Jewish people would not believe that Hashem had appeared to him.

Lashon hara is prohibited by the Torah (see Vayikra 19:16). It is a very serious sin but it is incredibly prevalent. It is forbidden to speak negatively about fellow Jews. The prohibition applies specifically to speech that is true. (Negative speech that is not true is a separate prohibition.) There are exceptions where negative speech is allowed (or even required) but certain criteria must be fulfilled before any negative speech can be spoken. It is important to understand the parameters of the laws and the exceptions so that we know what we can say and when we can say it.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan became known as the Chofetz Chaim after the name of his book which organised and clarified the laws of lashon hara. There is a story told about the Chofetz Chaim after he published his famous sefer. Someone said to him "Now I am not allowed to open my mouth!" He answered: "On the contrary, until now you did not know what was permitted to say and what was forbidden, so you had to keep your mouth closed. But now, when my sefer explains what is allowed and what is not allowed, you can talk".¹

One reason why lashon hara is so prevalent is because it is a quick and easy way for us to feel good about ourselves. When a person speaks negatively about others, that person appears relatively better in comparison, or at least normalises their own faults. But there is a much better way for people to feel good about themselves. They can work on themselves and their middot (character traits). This is hard work, but the long term benefits are much greater than the short term pleasure from speaking negatively about others.

There is another story told about the Chofetz Chaim.² One year on Purim, one of the Chofetz Chaim's students became tipsy and he started to badger his saintly Rav. He repeatedly asked the Chofetz Chaim to promise him an equal share in the World to Come. The Chofetz Chaim thought for a

¹ Bedikat HaMazon, Rav Moshe Vaye, page 85.

² Heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

moment and then said “I don’t know what share I have in the world to come. But whatever I have is due to the fact that I have never spoken a word of lashon hara. If you can accept upon yourself to never speak lashon hara for the rest of your life, then I can guarantee you a share in the World to Come that is equal to mine”. The student sobered up very quickly, thought for a long time and then rejected this challenge. Some people claim that the Chofetz Chaim was heard muttering “Here is a man that stood at the gate of heaven and refused to step in”.

If we are scrupulous with the laws of lashon hara we receive a measure of protection from punishment. Why is that the case? Hashem judges us on the basis of middah k’neged middah (measure for measure). If we refuse to speak negatively about other people, then when we receive our final judgement after 120 years, the prosecuting angel is not able to speak negatively about us.

Aside from the fact that lashon hara is a biblical prohibition that causes immense spiritual harm to the speaker and the listener, Rabbi Tatz explains that abstaining from lashon hara also makes sense from a purely practical and selfish perspective. If we sit down with a friend and share a nice juicy session of gossip, we can be almost certain that as soon as we leave our friend will share some gossip about us with someone else. If we all abstain from lashon hara, we are not just protecting the people that we otherwise would have spoken about, we are protecting ourselves!

There’s another famous story told about the Chofetz Chaim.³ The Chofetz Chaim was once travelling in a train and he struck up a conversation with one of his fellow passengers. The passenger, having no idea who he was speaking to, said that he was on his way to visit the greatest tzaddik of the generation, the Chofetz Chaim! The Chofetz Chaim was extremely humble, so he responded “He’s not so great. I wouldn’t call him the greatest tzaddik of the generation”. The passenger was so incensed at the lack of respect shown that he slapped the Chofetz Chaim in the face. The Chofetz Chaim didn’t say anything. Later that day, the passenger came in to the Chofetz Chaim’s study for his audience. When he realised who he was he begged forgiveness for slapping him. The Chofetz Chaim calmed him down and told him not to worry. “You taught me an important lesson today”, said the Chofetz Chaim. “You taught me that you shouldn’t even say lashon hara about yourself!

There are many books and resources available that teach these important halachot in a simple and practical manner (for example “We Want Life!” by R’ Yisroel Greenwald which is geared at children but adults love it). The laws of lashon hara are difficult to put into practice but there is no excuse for not learning them.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to commit to a regular revision of the laws of lashon hara.
2. For those that can’t afford the time for a regular session, read a short summary of the laws. Here are some great examples:
 - www.aish.com/f/p/48936067.html
 - www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/922039/jewish/Laws-of-Lashon-Hara.htm
 - www.torah.org/learning/halashon/index.php3 [If you have more time available]
3. Listen to an informative and entertaining audio shiur by Rabbi Tatz:
 - www.simpletoremember.com/media/a/lashonhara-practical/
4. The Torah commands us to be careful about what goes into our mouths and what comes out of our mouths. Let’s become a bit more aware of what comes out of our mouth and the damage that we may be causing. Let’s stop and think before we talk. If in doubt, don’t say it!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Allon Ledder

³ Also heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz.